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Title : Assessing the Effect of Human Disturbance on Steller Sea Lions

Category : Behavior

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Abstract : Steller sea lions are an endangered species in the Aleutian Islands and Gulf of Alaska and have been under intensive study in recent years. One of the major questions perplexing researchers and permitting authorities is whether or not disturbance from researchers is contributing to the population decline or impeding their recovery. Major disturbances occur when researchers go onto rookeries and haulouts to collect scats or to capture animals. Our study investigated the effects of such disturbance. We tested the response to human disturbance by conducting hourly counts and behavioural scans of Steller sea lions at 6 haulouts and rookeries in British Columbia and Southeast Alaska in 2003. Steller sea lions were observed for 1-2 weeks prior to being disturbed, and for 1-2 weeks following the experimental disturbance (scat collection). Counts were made every hour during daylight hours. Behavioral group scans were conducted every 20 minutes to document the proportion of Steller sea lions that were active and inactive; and individual animals arriving on shore were followed to determine normal patterns of interactions and disturbance associated with movements of animals on land. Statistical analyses addressed whether there were differences in numbers and behaviors before and after the disturbance. Results from this study further our understanding of the behavioral effects of human disturbance on Steller sea lions.